



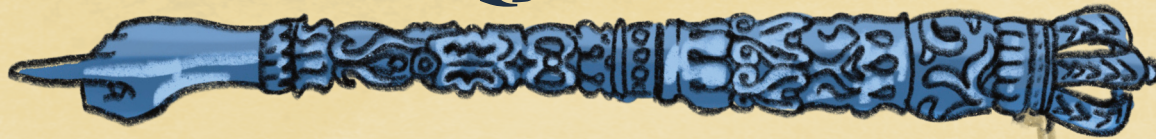
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MITZPEH

Exploring Jewish Legacy

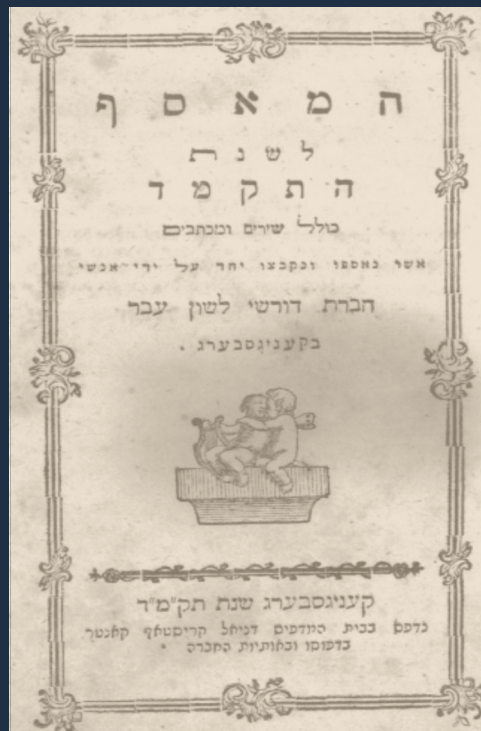
Table of Contents



Where it all Started Gabriella Kurzrok.....	4
Dead Sea Scrolls Gaby Goldberg	6
The Making of Tradition Mali Jaffe.....	8
Carrying the Story Forward Ben Slifkin.....	10
The Living Legacy of Rav Kook Ava Rowse.....	12
My Uncle George Mattie Newgent.....	16
The Karaite I Might Have Been Leora Rothschild.....	18
A Timeline of Jewish Continuity Ava Rowse and Liad Mussaffi.....	20
Who Will be the Zaidys? Aden Lerner.....	22
When Cain Killed Cain Liad Mussaffi.....	24
My Opa from the Rhineland Jonah Tecktiel.....	26
Photography and Poetry	28
An Ode to Jewish Fashion Liad Mussaffi	30
The Devil in Disguise Yonah Gross.....	32
Puzzles and Games The Mitzpeh Staff	34

Letter from the Editor

Hame'assef was the first Hebrew periodical of the Haskalah, founded in 1783 by the students of Moses Mendelssohn. Devoted to the ideals of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Maskilim carved out a rare space where Jewish thought could breathe freely in the light of modernity. It helped awaken Hebrew from centuries of dormancy, restoring it as a living language of creativity, learning, and human expression—not merely the tongue of prayer. Nowhere else did sacred texts and modern science share the same page—rabbinic debates appeared beside essays on mathematics, literature, and the natural sciences, reflecting a culture daring to think in two languages at once.



This publication captures the deep tension of a people caught between tradition and transformation—seeking renewal without severing their roots, and expressing new ideas in the familiar, sacred language of their past. As the emblem of the Haskalah, Hame'assef stands as a testament to an awakening—a moment when Jewish thought reached across centuries of tradition to touch the modern world, without letting go of its essence.

Legacy is not only what we inherit—it is what we choose to carry forward. Like Hame'assef, Mitzpeh is a place where our heritage guides our engagement with the world, rather than confines it. We illuminate that inheritance of the Maskilim, inviting readers to reflect, challenge, and contribute to a dialogue that is both timeless and urgently contemporary. In doing so, we honor the history that shapes us and the future we are shaping together.

Ava Rowse
Mitzpeh Editor-in-Chief

Thank you to our contributors

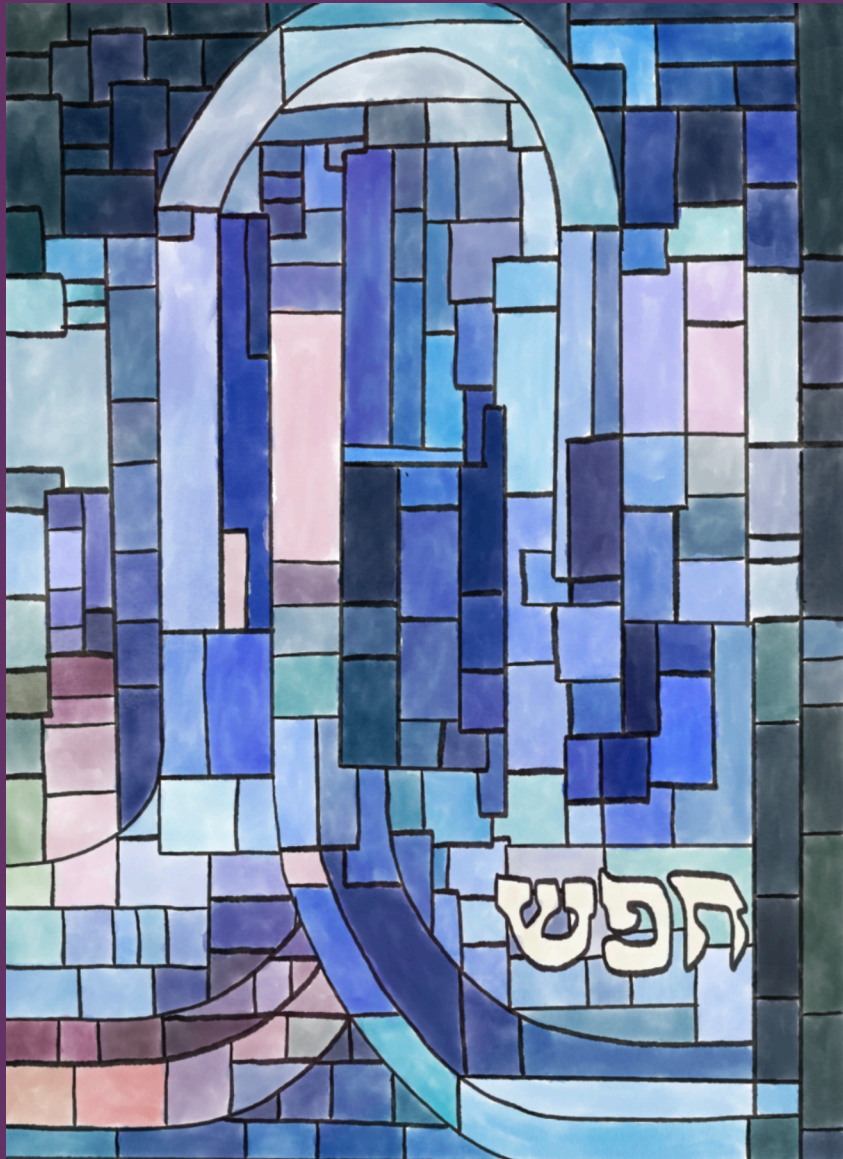
Gabriella Kurzrok, Gabriel Goldberg, Mali Jaffe, Ben Slifkin, Mattie Newgent, Leora Rothschild, Josh Parker, Aden Lerner, Liad Mussaffi, Jonah Tecktiel, Eli Turansky, Yonah Gross, Zoe Bayewitz, and Eliana Kovan

Where it all Started

By: Gabriella Kurzrok

A little girl sits in her preschool classroom, learning how to say her ABCs and recite Shabbat blessings. She plays with Legos, trains, and paints. Every Friday, she gets to do Shabbat twice, once at school with her friends and teachers, and once at home with her parents. At school, she says the blessing over the candles, drinks a Dixie cup of grape juice, and puts her little hand on the challah-cover when the class says the hamotzi. The prayers and Shabbat celebrations give structure to her life, providing security and comfort. In her mind, every preschool keeps grape juice and challah stocked the same way as crayons and markers. To her, the melodies are just another set of classroom songs, no different from Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. She doesn't know yet that these sounds—the melodies tucked between lessons—are being handed to her by the place she doesn't understand the rarity of.

She goes down to the sanctuary and watches as kids dance around, singing songs and prayers while the cantor strums his guitar and leads them in song. She listens without really listening, unaware of what the words mean but singing nonetheless. One day, she'll know these tunes by heart. When she gets home, she eagerly shows her parents how they do Shabbat at school. They blend the school's Shabbat songs with their own, singing them all as she dances around the kitchen with her father. It feels less



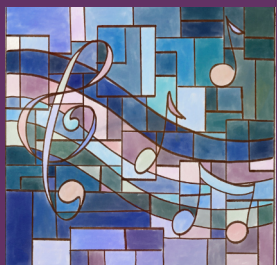
like she chose a love for music and more like the synagogue planted it gently in her, letting the melodies settle in the corners of her childhood without her noticing.

A few years later, a little girl steps into her kindergarten classroom, quiet and nervous. She sees Legos, trains, paints, and musical instruments, but no siddurim, sanctuary, or holiday celebrations. After a strange day, her babysitter picks her up, and they walk west, towards home. She wonders why no one said blessings before snack or sang the songs she thought all classrooms knew. Over the rumble of the bus, she starts to miss the hum of the melodies. Listening to Wheels on the Bus made her think about the Hebrew songs, how they used to slip in and lift the day,

even when she wasn't paying attention. She can't name the feeling yet, but the lack of those simple rituals makes the days feel unbalanced, as if the part of school that once made her feel at home had suddenly gone missing.

A week goes by with plenty more bus rides, only this Sunday's trip ended at her synagogue. Confused, she walks into a preschool classroom, but instead of pictures and drawings on the wall, there's a whiteboard with the words 'Hebrew School Year 5773, Welcome Kindergarteners!'

She sees her friends walk in and lights up—the same kids she used to sing blessings with every Friday. In the four hours of Hebrew School, they practice reading and writing, learn



stories from the Torah, and make their very own Shabbat candle holders. At the end of the day, they go to the sanctuary, and instead of sitting on the floor, they sit in chairs with their siddurim to sing their prayers, but this time read them too. She follows along without thinking, recognizing some of the Hebrew words on the page, unaware that

the rhythm of these harder blessings—their patterns, their steady familiarity and repetition—is beginning to root into her memory in the same quiet, lasting way the Shabbat blessings and holiday songs did when she was younger. She goes home and tells her dad all about the prayers, holidays, and words she can now read. Only later will she realize the synagogue has slipped another gift into her life—this time, a love of languages.

A young girl sits in Hebrew school around March, working on her Purim worksheet. They practice booing Hayman and waving groggers around. They tell the story of Queen Esther and discuss what their costumes will be. The teacher announces the Purim Spiel, encouraging all the kids to sign up. Her friends are ecstatic—she's a little nervous, but signs up anyway. Soon, she's back in the sanctuary twice a week for rehearsals, a space that suddenly feels different: louder, brighter, full of music, lights, and dancing. She hates being on stage, but she can't help but love how the melodies echo through the room, how a Billy Joel song somehow becomes about Shushan and hamantaschen, how the whole story seems to come alive when the lights hit the stage. In the sanctuary, theatre feels less like a production and more like an extension of everything she already knows—songs, jokes, lights, and people she loves. Slowly, she finds that the synagogue gave her a third gift: the love for theatre.

A teen girl has just become a bat mitzvah. Her friends are dancing and singing, her family is hugging and crying, and she's relieved to be done—until she's not. Being a bat mitzvah meant no more Hebrew school, no more dancing and singing the prayers, no more learning Jewish history and language. In the middle of the celebration, somewhere between a hug and a photograph, she feels a small shift, like a door closing behind her. For years, Judaism had arrived wrapped in songs and worksheets and teachers who guided her hand along every Hebrew letter, whether it was every day in preschool or a couple times a week in Hebrew school and tutoring. Now the voices around her blur, and she realizes that here on out, no one is going to hand her the melodies, the history, and the stories. If she wants them, she'll have to find her own way to them, again and again. This identity that grew quietly inside her is now hers to claim.



She finishes her year and wonders what to do now that her Sundays are free. A couple of months after her Bat Mitzvah,

she received an email from her Rabbi: "Register for our Madrichim Program!" She clicks, reads, and runs out to her father, jumping and asking if she can sign up, having no idea what it entails. In September, she walks into the sanctuary for T'filah, and instead of sitting in the chairs, following along with her yad, she walks around and helps kids sound out words and figure out meanings. She heads to the classroom and helps them read and write in the ancient language, teaches Jewish history and holidays, tells Torah stories, and helps them make the same crafts she did when she was in Hebrew school.

It takes her years to realize it, but every corner of the synagogue has been teaching her something new about herself. First music, then language, then theatre, and now, something else. And somewhere between a kid finally pronouncing their prayers, another proudly holding up a lopsided holiday craft, and a third tugging her sleeve to ask a question, she realizes she's smiling—really smiling. The synagogue suddenly became the place that raised her, and she wanted to continue to grow within its walls.

From preschool to adulthood, synagogues are places where we learn, question, and thrive as a community. It gives us little things first: a melody hummed during cleanup time, a Hebrew letter traced in crayon, the weight of a siddur too big for our hands. Those pieces settle slowly, almost without notice. Years later, they're still felt, clicking into place like a puzzle. The scraps of memory from childhood weren't scraps at all, but beginnings—tiny sparks that grew into passions I carry with me now.



Years later, I can trace so much of myself back to those rooms. My love of music and theatre, my draw to language and teaching, weren't accidents or things I just came across. They were shaped by cozy classrooms, sanctuary echoes, and people who believe that tradition is something you live, not memorize.

The ritual of singing prayers before meals turned into playing piano after dinner. A yearly Purim Spiel turned into me working on four productions a year. Learning Hebrew turned into teaching Hebrew, and then learning two more languages.

We search for ourselves, find ourselves, and return—each time a little older, a little different, but still at home. Staying connected to the gift synagogue has given me makes going back feel inevitable, like stepping back into a story we've been part of all along. When your home is the synagogue, it isn't just the building or the prayers or the challah on Friday nights; it's the laughter in the hallways between lessons, the songs that echo from the sanctuary, the smell of grape juice and candles, and the people who watched us grow up and still email to check in. It's where we learned to sing, to lead, to question, and to listen as Jews. It's where a little girl once learned her blessings, her letters, her voice, and herself. Even as she grows and moves beyond those walls, a part of her will always be there—spinning around the sanctuary to a guitar, singing along.

Ideological Diversity of Second Temple Judaism:

Evaluating the “truth” of Judaism

By: Gabriel Goldberg

If I told you, “politics is true,” you wouldn’t know what that meant. Politics isn’t a single worldview; it’s a field of rival ideologies. Saying “foreign policy is true” is equally incoherent. Foreign policy isn’t one doctrine — it’s realism, liberalism, neoconservatism, restraint, and dozens of competing frameworks. People don’t speak this way because it collapses a diverse field into a meaningless slogan.

Yet many people talk about Judaism this way.

The statement “Judaism is true” assumes Judaism is a singular, unified worldview. Historically, it wasn’t. In the late Second Temple period — the era closest to the formation of our scriptures and institutions — “Judaism” contained incompatible theologies, canons, halakhic systems, and eschatologies. It was not one religion. It was an ecosystem of competing Judaisms that shared ancestry while disagreeing on almost everything that matters in a truth-claim debate. Until that basic historical fact is confronted, any claim about the “truth” of Judaism has no defined content.

1. Second Temple Judaism Was Doctrinally Fragmented

The Dead Sea Scrolls did not reveal a lost form of Judaism. They exposed the reality that Second Temple Judaism was never the unified religion people imagine. Different groups did not disagree over details — they operated with entirely different theological structures.

Pharisees: As described by Josephus, the Pharisees believed in resurrection, accepted angels and spirits, upheld an Oral Law, and held a hybrid model of fate: some things were predetermined, some not.

Sadducees: Josephus also records the Sadducean position: denial of resurrection, skepticism toward angels, rejection of Oral Law, and strong free-will emphasis. Their theology fundamentally contradicted the Pharisaic one.

Essenes/Qumran: The Qumran sect added deterministic theology, extreme ritual purity, a strict dualistic worldview, and the expectation of two messiahs — a priestly and a royal one.

Samaritans: The Samaritans accepted only the Torah, revered Mount Gerizim, and preserved their own Pentateuchal tradition. For them, Judean religion had already deviated.

These were not denominations of one religion. These were separate ideological systems, all calling themselves “Israel.”

2. Shared Scriptures Did Not Produce Shared Theology

People often assume that if Jews shared scripture, they must have shared a core theology. The historical evidence contradicts this. Fitzmyer, as cited by John J. Collins, notes that there is “no evidence at Qumran of a systematic, uniform exegesis... the same text was not always given the same interpretation.” Even within one sect, scripture did not create cohesion.

Across groups, the divergences expand:

– Isaiah 11 is read differently in Qumran, the Psalms of Solomon, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs.

– Numbers 24 and Amos 9:11 appear in contradictory interpretive contexts even within sectarian materials.

– Qumran contains multiple biblical textual traditions: proto-Masoretic, proto-Samaritan, Septuagintal, and unique local editions.

Scripture did not unify belief. It fractured it. When someone today says “Judaism teaches X because the Bible says Y,” they are imposing a later rabbinic consensus onto a period where no consensus existed.

3. Messianism Shows the Full Extent of the Diversity

Messianism is often treated as a defining belief of Judaism. The evidence shows there was no single messianic doctrine.

Qumran's Dual Messianism: The Community Rule (1QS 9:11) expects "the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel," clearly implying two figures. The Damascus Document sometimes preserves this duality, sometimes compresses it. Collins argues the evidence for a priestly messiah is extensive, especially where the priest outranks the king.

Other Jewish Views on the Messiah:

- Some texts (like 4Q246 and 4Q521) describe a single eschatological figure.
- Many Jews expected a prophetic leader from Deuteronomy 18.
- Others expected Elijah.
- Some elevate angelic agents such as Melchizedek.
- The Sadducees appear to have had no robust messiah doctrine at all.

Laurin emphasizes that Jews distinguished between "the Messiah," "the Prophet," and "Elijah," indicating that these roles were not collapsed into one figure. There was no uniform messianic expectation. Saying "Judaism teaches X about the Messiah" is historically indefensible.

4. No Unbroken Tradition: Survival Is Not Truth

A popular but incorrect narrative imagines a continuous chain: Moses → Prophets → Second Temple → Rabbis → Today. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that Judaism was never a single line but a cluster of competing branches.

Collins notes that the Scrolls provide a "window" into early Judaism but act as a foil, not a direct predecessor, to rabbinic tradition. The Pharisaic lineage survived the destruction of the Temple; the Sadducees and Essenes did not. Samaritan Judaism survived on the margins. Diaspora intellectual traditions influenced later thinkers indirectly. The fact that the rabbinic stream survived does not make it the metaphysically correct one. It makes it the historically successful one.

Truth and sociological endurance are not the same thing. If someone claims their Judaism is true in a descriptive sense, they must explain why their stream — rather than the Samaritan, Sadducean, or Qumranic streams — should be treated as the defining continuation of ancient Israelite religion.

5. Intellectual Honesty Requires Picking a Judaism and Defending It

If someone says they practice Judaism because it enriches their life, that is a personal preference. No philosophical conflict. But if someone claims Judaism is true — true about God, true about metaphysics, true about how the world is — they have to justify that claim by answering a series of unavoidable questions:

Which Judaism? Why that one? Why not the Samaritan tradition? Why not the Sadducean tradition? Why not Qumran's dual-messiah eschatology? Why should historical survival equal theological authority?

Without answers, the claim "Judaism is true" is not a truth-claim at all. It's an identity statement disguised as metaphysics.

Daniel Dennett once remarked that the dangerous thing about religion is that it gives people a "gold-plated excuse to stop thinking." You don't have to agree with his entire philosophy to see the point: if someone claims Judaism is true without ever confronting the actual historical diversity of Judaisms, the thinking has stopped. The conclusion is doing the work of the argument.

6. The Debate Improves Once You Confront the Diversity

Admitting this complexity doesn't weaken Judaism. It's the only way to have a serious conversation about it. Once you stop pretending there was one Judaism, you can actually evaluate real questions:

Is Qumran's priest-first hierarchy textually defensible?

Are Pharisaic halakhic principles the most coherent extension of Torah?

Does the Samaritan Torah-only canon solve or create problems?

Did apocalyptic sects misread prophetic texts?

How do divergent textual traditions affect appeals to revelation?

These are substantive questions. They require reasoning, not slogans.

If someone wants to build their life on Judaism — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or traditionalist — they should understand the historical ecosystem that existed before all those categories. You cannot responsibly debate the truth of Judaism until you define which Judaism you are talking about, and you cannot define it without confronting the history.

THE MAKING

Growing up with mostly non-Jewish friends, I spent a lot of time explaining why I wouldn't eat certain foods, why I couldn't have a sleepover on Friday night, and why we had so many days off from school in the fall.



All are interesting questions to bring up. Why did I do all of these special things? Where did they come from?

In the beginning, it was enough for me to say *I do this because I'm Jewish.* My parents did, my community did. There was nothing more to it.



But as I grew up, I began to feel curious. In Hebrew school, I had learned that the story of Purim ended in Haman being "exiled" from Shushan. And yet, when I was old enough to hear it, the story changed. 75,000 people were killed.

As a child, I had learned about Chanukah as a story about religious freedoms. When I grew older and my parents expanded the story, it morphed into a celebration of a strong military and Jewish self-governance, marked by the minting of Jewish coins.

As my understanding of Jewish tradition and history became more complex, I began to realize that our traditions, and our reasons for practicing them, have always been subject to change.



Sometimes the reasons we observe a tradition are clearly developed through textual evidence, but sometimes they are a mystery.



Many ancient Jewish texts document an eight-day holiday celebrated every 25th of Kislev, but very few describe Chanukah as the holiday we celebrate today. The documentation that does exist suggests that even historians struggled to determine the origins of many Chanukah traditions.



I was recently introduced to the concept of "invented traditions" by my Professor in a religious studies class. This idea explains how modern traditions present themselves as ancient, using historically justified origins, and draw credibility from a long, continuous history. In this way, modern traditions, or alterations to previous traditions, maintain continuity with ancient practices while still changing drastically over time.

To understand how Chanukah and its traditions have evolved, one should examine Maccabees I and II, documents authored during the Maccabean revolt by different historians, as well as "Antiquities of the Jews" by the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus.

Maccabees I describes how the Jews cleansed and rededicated the Second Temple after a successful revolt against the Seleucid Empire. From the redeemed Temple, Judah named the 25th of Kislev a day of celebration, and "ordained that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days." (Maccabees I 4:57)



Here we see a reference to the eight-day holiday, but the record never references a miracle regarding oil or specific celebrations other than performing a sacrifice in the redeemed Temple and praising God.

OF TRADITION

In Maccabees II, when the Jews return to the Temple on the 25th of Kislev, they celebrate their redemption "for eight days, like the days of the festival of Sukkot." They shake lulavs and "[remember] the previous days when they celebrated the Festival of Sukkot in mountains and in caves." (II Maccabees 10:9) In this case, the holiday that later becomes Chanukah starts as a make-up for Sukkot.

But if this is true, why did it continue for years after the Temple was redeemed? The text offers no answer.

The next reference we see comes later, in around 94 CE, when Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus described the Festival of Lights in his 20-volume historiographical work "Antiquities of the Jews." This is the first time "The Festival of Lights" has appeared in historical documentation. He explained, in Greek, the celebration to a Roman audience. However, despite referring to Chanukah as the Festival of Lights, he does not seem to know where the name comes from.

Josephus' confusion about Chanukah's title suggests that the tradition of lighting candles had not yet existed. If he knew about this tradition, "The Festival of Lights" would be an obvious name for the holiday.

The tradition of lighting candles and the story of the miraculous oil come from the Babylonian Talmud, which was written about three centuries after Maccabees I and II. Hundreds of years after Josephus, the Rabbis deliberated about proper ways to observe Chanukah traditions. They argue about the right way to light and display the Chanukiah, in order to fulfill what has become the Mitzvah.

This raises a fascinating question about how and why, during the years between Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud, the tradition of lighting Chanukah candles came to be. Historians today still aren't sure.

Shai Secunda, a scholar of religious worlds of late antique Babylonian Jewry and Sasanian Iran, suggests the Babylonian Rabbis might have found inspiration in Zoroastrian traditions they witnessed around them. Elon Gilad, a historian, writer, and editor for Haaretz, credits Saturnalia, a celebration honoring the Roman god Saturn, which became popular in the later Roman period. Some believe that the tradition of candle lighting emerged on its own over time as a result of several cultures in which candles are lit during winter celebrations.

After learning all that I did from these historical texts, has my answer of "I just do" changed? Does it matter that the holiday I celebrate is not the one celebrated by the Jews of the 2nd century BCE? Is my relationship to my Jewish past any less authentic? I don't believe it is.

When confronted with historical discrepancies in our tradition, one might feel compelled to "find the answer." I definitely do. But the truth is that we may never know where, when, why, or how the Chanukah tradition of lighting candles originated.

This dilemma leaves Jews, and all observers of "invented traditions," with the same question my friends asked a younger me: "Why do I practice this tradition?"

Each generation of Jews before me, across thousands of years of history, has participated in building and maintaining a tradition that I choose to continue every year.

On the 25th of Kislev, I spend eight days illuminated by candle light with the people I love the most, we eat the same foods our ancestors did—maybe not thousands of years ago, but at least hundreds, we play games and tell stories that represent our people's resilience, and I think about how amazing it is that all of Jewish history has culminated in this moment.

These practices, and the fact that they exist today, are a living miracle, and reflections of a people that I will always be proud to celebrate.





CARRYING THE STORY FORWARD: LEGACY IN FILM AND JUDAISM

BY: BEN SLIFKIN

Legacy raises the question of what remains after a character, a story, or even a generation fades. In movies, legacy is preserved through the memories and emotions that keep franchises alive across decades. In Judaism, legacy is rooted in continuity, remembrance, and the duty each generation has to carry its history forward. By putting these two together, we can see how both film and Jewish tradition show that legacy is powerful but fragile, and that it only survives when it is handled with care rather than nostalgia or neglect.

Franchises like “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones” offer some of the clearest examples of how legacy functions in modern culture, both when it flourishes and when it breaks down. The original films created iconic narratives that inspired decades of storytelling. However, the more recent films reveal how studios increasingly rely on a viewer’s nostalgia rather than fostering meaningful continuation. This has left us with shallow reflections of beloved stories, when we’re all craving authentic extensions of them. The Jewish understanding of legacy might offer the answer to a question all storytellers wonder: why do some stories endure while others fade away?

In the original “Star Wars” trilogy, legacy was central to the narrative. Luke Skywalker’s journey was anchored in the memory of the Jedi, a fading tradition that survived only through a few aging mentors. Luke inherited not only a lightsaber, but the hopes and failures of past generations. His story was about rebuilding an almost-forgotten moral and spiritual order. When the sequel trilogy emerged decades later, it presented an opportunity to explore how legacy is passed on in a changing galaxy. Instead, the films relied on recreating familiar imagery, locations, and plot points. Instead of building a new philosophical direction for the Jedi, the sequels recycled tired emotional motifs from earlier films.

The introduction of the character Rey in The New Star Wars trilogy was promising for fans, but her development felt constrained by the studio’s desire to replicate the impact of Luke’s story. The result was a fragmented legacy. Rather than exploring how new generations reinterpret ancient traditions, the sequels pulled backward toward nostalgia. The reliance on returning icons, such as Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Leia Organa, became both a comfort and a limitation.

Their appearances were used more as emotional triggers than meaningful mentorships. Legacy, as a theme, became reduced to cameo moments rather than a deep exploration of continuity. This reflects a modern cultural struggle: how to respect what came before without becoming trapped by it.

The “Indiana Jones” franchise reveals a similar tension. The original trilogy portrayed Indiana Jones as a hero of intellect, moral conviction, and adventurous spirit. The character became iconic not because of spectacle, but because of the values he embodied. When the newer films attempted to continue his story, they faced the challenge of honoring an aging hero while introducing new characters who might carry the torch. Instead of crafting a thoughtful transition, the newer installments leaned too much on heavy nostalgia. Once again, familiar objects, villains, and jokes reappeared without the emotional grounding that once gave them meaning.

The 2023 film attempted to position Indiana Jones as a relic in a world moving forward, yet it struggled to create a successor that felt natural and compelling.

This issue is not unique to “Star Wars” or “Indiana Jones.” Many modern franchises use nostalgia to mask weak storytelling. “Jurassic World” leans heavily on references to the original film, yet its characters rarely explore the deeper themes of scientific responsibility that made the original “Jurassic Park” enduring. “Ghostbusters: Afterlife” recreates the imagery of proton packs and ghost traps, but hesitates to move beyond the patterns established in the 1980s film. Even the Marvel Cinematic Universe, once praised for innovation, now faces criticism for recycling similar story arcs without the narrative focus that defined its early phases.

Nostalgia itself is not harmful unless it starts to replace growth. When a franchise becomes trapped in the shadows of its origins, legacy becomes a burden rather than a foundation. Stories that once thrived on originality repeat themselves, and characters lose their agency as they become symbols of a past that the studio is afraid to leave behind.

Judaism’s understanding of legacy provides an important contrast. In Jewish tradition, legacy is rooted in constant renewal. Memory is essential, but it is not enough on its own. Traditions survive not because they remain unchanged, but because each generation actively reinterprets them. The retelling of the Exodus at Passover is a perfect example. Families recall ancient events, yet every generation relates the story to its own world, fears, and hopes. Texts like the Talmud exist because scholars refused to let the past become static. Instead, they questioned, reimagined, and added their voices to it.

Legacy in Judaism is a relationship. It requires respect for the past and creativity in the present. This balance is often missing in modern film franchises. While Judaism sees legacy as a living responsibility, many film studios treat it as a commodity or a brand. They fear altering the past too much, yet in doing so, fail to create meaningful futures. The result is fiction that feels stuck, neither fully honoring the original nor offering anything new.

When “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones” first emerged, they created legacies by capturing new ideas, characters, and worlds. They succeeded because they were not imitations. They were bold. They carved out new spaces in the cultural imagination. The lesson here is clear: legacy is created through originality and strengthened through reinvention. It cannot survive if it remains only as a museum exhibit.

What makes Judaism’s handling of legacy so successful over thousands of years is its willingness to engage with change. Jewish law evolves, new commentaries are written, and rituals adapt to new environments.

This does not weaken the tradition; it strengthens it, allowing every generation to connect to it on a personal level. This is the blueprint modern franchises need to follow. Instead of allowing new characters to inherit the core values of their predecessors and reinterpret them in their own way, studios are struggling to let go of the past. They want Luke Skywalker forever. They want Indiana Jones forever. Yet legacy cannot be sustained by refusing to move on.

Ultimately, the future of storytelling depends on the same principle that guides Jewish continuity: legacy must be a dialogue. It must move in two directions. It must honor origins while embracing transformation. Film franchises that will thrive in the coming decades will be the ones that respect the old stories, but have the confidence to build new ones. “Star Wars,” “Indiana Jones,” and many others still have this potential. They can regain meaning by allowing legacy to function not as a nostalgic echo, but as a living force that inspires fresh narratives.

Both Judaism and cinema remind us that legacy is not simply what is left behind. It is what we choose to carry forward. It is the act of adding our own stories to the ones we inherited, ensuring that the past does not fade but also does not hold us back. Legacy is a choice and a responsibility. When handled well, it creates everlasting worlds.

The Living Legacy of Rav Kook

By: Ava Rowse





In May of 1967, the students of Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva huddled around their trembling Rav - Zvi Yehuda Kook. As the son and spiritual heir of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, he carried the immense weight of his father's vision. On the 19th anniversary of Israeli

Independence, his voice cut through the hushed room, raw with urgency and longing, delivering a speech that would soon be remembered as prophetic.

“Where is our Hebron - are we forgetting that?!” The Rabbi cried. “Where is our Schechem - are we forgetting that?!”



The Torah scholars had not forgotten the significance of these cities. Hebron was King David's first capital city before he conquered Jerusalem, and Shechem was the location where God promised the Land of Israel to Abram in Genesis.

Zvi Yehuda was heartbroken. To him, the 1948 map of Israel showed a spiritual amputation; the body of the Jewish people with missing limbs. He could not earnestly celebrate the nation's freedom when, he truly believed, the country was yet to be fully liberated.

That night, only weeks before the Six-Day War, Zvi Yehuda's cries signaled the emergence of a new, uncompromising vision of Religious Zionism.

It was not accidental that such a moment unfolded at the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva. Founded by Rav Abraham Isaac Kook in 1924 and long regarded as the premier institution of Religious Zionism, the yeshiva had for decades served as the incubator of Kookian thought. Within these walls, revolutionary ideas took shape. Rav Kook's

ideas, shaped tremendously by his son's experience, continue to unfold in ways that impact everyone living in the land today.

Origins of Religious Zionism and Rav Kook's Unique Theology

Zionism has lived in the hearts and imagination of the Jewish people since biblical times, and for a community that remained largely observant of Jewish law until the late 19th century, that yearning was expressed primarily in religious terms. But as modern nationalism swept through Europe, Zionism was recast as a secular political project – one that often defined itself in opposition to traditional religious life. Against this backdrop, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook's embrace of the modern Zionist movement was nothing short of revolutionary.

Although there were a handful of Religious Zionists before Rav Kook, none had been able to synthesize the ancient religious longing for Zion with the modern, secular movement on the ground. What most other traditionalists saw as a heretical project that would estrange Jews from Torah, Kook understood as an "Orot" instrument of redemption; God's hand reaching down, unveiling history and driving the Jewish people back to the Land of Israel.

It was Rav Kook's remarkable ability to reconcile conflicting ideas and tolerate tension that allowed him to construct an entirely new religious worldview. Grounded in the monistic ideal of the unity of opposites, he believed that all seemingly contradictory realities make up “a single, harmonious whole.” He saw the sacred and the profane as dimensions of the same divine reality, rather than opposites. To Rav Kook, the Jewish people – despite their inherent religious, ideological, and geographic divisions – were one organic nation bound together by God.

In Rav Kook's theology, the nation exiled for generations lived far from its land but never outside it; the bond between people and soil remained a single, indivisible sanctity.

This dialectical theology, with its intricate balancing of opposites, challenged even his most devoted followers. From an early age, Zvi Yehuda immersed himself in his father's mystical worldview, internalizing the belief that every effort to build the Jewish nation, religious or secular, marked another step towards messianic redemption.

This devotion, both to his father's honor and the coming of the Messiah, would shape the way Zvi Yehuda approached his father's writings.



Publishing of "Orot" by Rav Kook

In 1921, Rav Kook's first book "Orot" was published, only it was edited and compiled by his son. "Orot" remains a foundational text of Religious Zionism today, particularly the famous chapter titled 'HaMilchama' (The War), which had profound influence over the development of the theology of militarism.

Scholars note that Zvi Yehuda's editorial changes were motivated in part by a desire to protect his father from criticism during his lifetime, thus moderating some of the more contentious statements. As time went on, however, Zvi Yehuda increasingly removed or softened certain phrases that highlighted the more kabbalistic, universalist, and dialectical dimensions of his father's theology. It was precisely these expansive, sometimes porous boundaries between law, mysticism, and universal moral vision that Zvi Yehuda opted to deemphasize. In their place, he stressed themes that aligned more clearly with a nationalist, land-centered reading: the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the absolute sanctity of the Land of Israel, the diminished value of diaspora existence, and the framing of the modern era as urgently messianic.

Only much later, when previously sealed manuscripts were released to scholars, did it become clear just how expansive Zvi Yehuda's editorial role had been. We are still discovering ways in which Zvi Yehuda, in his father's lifetime and after, became a co-architect of his father's intellectual legacy.

The Essay that Was Never Written

"Orot" includes a famous chapter titled Ha-Milchama (The War), with ten different passages, nine of which were written by Rav Kook during the First World War. Having experienced the "war to end all wars," as it was known at the time, Rav Kook wrote about the depraved nature of global politics, and his disdain for Jews having to participate in violence. In the third passage of The War in "Orot", Kook wrote that Jews must yearn for the time "when it is possible to administer a state without evil and barbarism." He asserted that the Jewish Nation will become a unified polity once again, but only after the world transforms into one where politics can exist without bloodshed. Rav Kook's writings are imbued with the idea that it is not fitting for the Jews "to engage in statehood when it involves bloodshed, when it demands a talent for evil."

When read on their own, the nine WWI-era passages reveal Kook's profound sorrow over the existence of wars and his hope that they might one day cease. These passages reflect "an

exceedingly complex treatment of the topic, involving... vacillations between national and universal concerns," demonstrating the depth of Kook's spiritual and moral deliberations on militarism.

The introductory passage, by contrast, appears to have been stitched together from sentence fragments drawn from multiple manuscripts. Pieced together from letters written to his family and study partner, Rabbi Harlap, the opening passage was built from intimate strings of questioning regarding the relationship between good and evil, between a society that self-destructed during WWI and the world to come. Zvi Yehuda took the liberty to construct an essay from scattered sentences, and claim his father had written it.

By placing this composite text as the start of The War, Zvi Yehuda shaped how readers encountered his father's theology of war, subtly setting the tone for a more assertive, nationalist interpretation he will soon adopt.

While Rav Kook did not repudiate any of his published writings during his lifetime, the ways they were interpreted and deployed after his death might have elicited a very different response from him.

Zvi Yehuda's Control of Manuscripts

Following Rav Kook's death in 1935, Zvi Yehuda held primary access to his father's manuscripts. Rav Kook left behind a universe of mystical meditations scattered across dozens of notebooks. His unfiltered ideas, some written in eccentric pondering, some to cope with personal anguish, formed an unruly, deeply intimate corpus that remained largely inaccessible to anyone outside Zvi Yehuda's inner-scholarly circle.

As a sense of national rebirth took hold—illegal boats of Jewish refugees slipping into Haifa and new kibbutzim spreading across the land—Zvi Yehuda labored over scattered manuscripts, trying to assemble a coherent picture of his father's ideas. Living through events his father had only theorized about, he translated Rav Kook's abstract, dialectical meditations into concrete political principles.

He "inhabited the conceptual world of his father," but the reality around him was rapidly changing. Rav Kook wrote about pioneers, while Zvi confronted an established state; instead of the Land of Israel being the foundation for a perfect society, Zvi saw an imperfect society as the platform for the Land of Israel.

Kookian Divergences

Sorting through manuscripts and published works, it becomes clear where this father and son tended to see things differently. Two months before the establishment of the State of Israel, Zvi Yehuda wrote that the strength of Israel's militias should be attributed to the "special divine property" of the Jewish Nation. In other words, Zvi Yehuda saw the segullah, or unique trait, of the Jews in their impressive military capabilities.

As is expressed by Rav Kook's writings in Olat Reiyah, he viewed the segullah of the Jews entirely differently. The unique aspect of Judaism's character is the very fact that Jews were "not commanded to raise the sword of war to invoke the Lord's name to nations who know Him not." What separates the Jews from others is that the light they are destined to bring unto the nations "does not possess the ability to spread by an encounter of conflict."

This belief becomes even more evident in Rav Kook's reinterpretation of the famous Three Oaths, mentioned in Ketubot, which served as binding laws regarding the Jews in exile. For much of history, it was understood that a) Jews must not ascend to the Land of Israel by force, b) Jews must not rebel against the nations of the world, and c) the nations must not oppress the Jews too harshly. To anti-Zionist Orthodox Rabbis, these binding oaths prohibit Jews from "forcing the End," or bringing redemption at the improper time.

Rav Kook, however, expands the legal boundaries to encompass the messianic era as well, therefore restricting messianic activism to "non-belligerent modes of operation." The sources themselves cannot settle what Rav Kook would have ruled halakhically about using force to bring the redemption, but in reading them alongside Zvi Yehuda's teachings, the contrast is striking.

1948–1967: Historical Developments

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Kook's messianism—rooted in "hope, yearning, and deep faith"—was reshaped by his son into a "deterministic scheme," a vision in which redemption pressed forward with inexorable force. Religious Zionists were already dreaming of the biblical heartlands, and Zvi Yehuda's interpretations only sharpened that longing into urgency.

The miraculous Israeli victory in the Six-Day War thrust the ideological currents of Religious Zionism into a new historical reality.

The biblical heartlands, the region home to the ancient streets our forefathers walked, were no longer just a dream. They were under Jewish sovereignty once again.

"Where is Hebron? Where is Shechem?" no longer sounded like a lament. Instead, it became a declaration that history had finally caught up with prophecy. The missing pieces of God's land had returned, and for Zvi Yehuda and his students, their return demanded action.

Israeli society underwent profound upheaval after the Six-Day War, but the most transformative development was the rise of the Settler Movement, an ascendant force of Religious Zionist ideologues galvanized by the war's outcome.

This ideological settler movement emerged from the teachings of Zvi Yehuda Kook, nurtured within the walls—and the authority—of his father's yeshiva. Israeli politics and the map of the West Bank have been forever changed by the tides of these revolutionary ideals.

With the words of their trembling Rav imprinted in their memory, students of Zvi Yehuda Kook were among the first to establish settlements in the West Bank in September 1967. What he set in motion was a deeply personal attempt to preserve and extend his father's legacy. In his devotion, Zvi Yehuda was so enamored with Rav Kook's writings that he sought to make them live in the world, to stay alive for the following generations.

In doing so, he overshot the delicate balance his father had struck. The mystical tensions, the ethical hesitations, the universalist horizons that Rav Kook had woven into his thought were flattened. In trying to preserve his father's legacy, he in fact transformed it.

The legacy of Rav Kook is still claimed by various opposing schools of Jewish thought. Modern Orthodox students admire his ability to pull from secular and religious philosophy. Extremist Religious Zionists look to his teachings to justify their aggressive approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

His legacy endures as a fractured mirror, reflecting back vastly different interpretations of what Jewish destiny and responsibility demand.

My Uncle George

By: Mattie Newgent

My uncle keeps his great-grandmother's needlepoint of a small house in the village where his family once lived in Czechoslovakia, an heirloom that carries generations of memory.

My uncle, George Robot, was born in Košice, Czechoslovakia, in 1960 to two Holocaust survivors. In April 1965, when George was just five years old, his family immigrated to the United States. His parents were determined that their visa would not be temporary; they were coming to America to stay.

"When we came to the States, we followed my mother's aunt, and my mother's sister and my father's brother who had moved to Chicago. We visited briefly with relatives in New York and moved to Chicago."

In Chicago, the family lived with George's mother's aunt in a pair of adjoining flats. For his parents, rebuilding life meant returning to faith and community. George and his sister were enrolled in an Orthodox Jewish day school, and his mother finally had a kosher kitchen again.

His father, though less observant than he had been before the war, still went to shul regularly. George's childhood was steeped in Jewish life. Nine years of day school, Orthodox summer camp, and a religious high school. It wasn't until he went college when he started to make friends in other environments.

Like many Jewish parents rebuilding after the war, George's parents placed enormous value on education.

"My parents, like all Jewish parents, pushed for education. It was kind of a big thing for them to create a better life than they had... It wasn't a question of whether I would go to school, it was just whether I would be a doctor or lawyer." He began his studies in chemistry but soon discovered his passion for architecture, eventually earning a civil engineering degree. "I got paid next to nothing, we were developing property in a rundown area of downtown Chicago."

Over the years, George worked in both architecture and engineering, developing strip malls in Chicago, before shifting careers to law after the birth of his first son. He earned his law degree at Chicago-Kent College of Law and now practices civil rights law, focusing on race and gender discrimination cases.

George's parents came from small, traditionally Hungarian Jewish villages. His father was born in Hungary, and eight years later, his mother was born in a neighboring town that had become part of Czechoslovakia after borders shifted.

"They grew up with a pretty strictly observant Jewish upbringing, but after the war it was really hard to follow any traditional observance. It was impossible to get kosher meat, so they became more secular in that timeframe."



George's father (center) with his two parents and siblings

Yet traces of Jewish life were almost completely erased. "There were a couple of Jewish graves in a wooded area and we later found out that they had paved over what had been the Jewish cemetery when they built a new train station."

The war reached George's parents in 1944. His mother was just sixteen when she and her family were taken to a ghetto and later deported to Birkenau. "Fortunately they were only there for the last year of the war." Of his mother's family, only she and her sister Carol survived.

His father, one of seven children, lost his parents and four siblings in the camps. He had served in the Czech army and was captured, ending up in a Russian labor camp where he lost all his toes to frostbite. His younger brother was taken to Auschwitz as a teenager and survived.

After the war, George's father sent his surviving brothers to New York to live with an uncle who had immigrated before the war. He himself stayed behind in Czechoslovakia, where he eventually met and married George's mother.

"My father never spoke about it. I know very little about my father's day-to-day experiences. My mother only spoke about the positive aspects of it... she said occasionally there were timed guards who would give her bread or crusts of bread, so she said not everybody were horrible monsters."

George's parents built a quiet postwar life together. His father held a law degree but struggled to find meaningful work under communist rule. "At one point he was given a job of basically nationalizing farms... he had to travel from farm to farm to deliver the bad news that they were now working for the government..." He later became a hospital administrator, and George's mother, a nurse, loved the peacefulness of rural life. "My mother loved it because it was quiet, she loved to do needlepoint and read... they had kind of a quiet rural life for some years."

When the family arrived in America, George's father gave up his law career and worked as a bookkeeper. His mother became a radiology technician and later a manager, eventually hiring George's future wife, Teresa.

George told me his biggest regret is not recording more of his mother and his aunt, and the stories of their experiences.

His mother and aunt Carol recorded their stories for the Steven Spielberg Shoah Foundation, but George still wishes he had asked more. He wondered about how they kept kosher, about Pesach, about the small details of life that were lost. "It kind of bothers me that I didn't [ask] because it would have been nice to know."

"There certainly is this kind of weight on my shoulders of the generations that came before me and were not there anymore."

Growing up, George often felt that absence. He had no grandparents, while many of his classmates did. His mother's Hungarian cooking—rich, distinct, and comforting—connected him to a culture shaped by loss. "We loved it... but it was definitely different. It felt different. I felt different, I felt the weight of what had happened."

His mother's relatives who settled in Israel were constant reminders of resilience. Her cousin Yossi fought in the 1948 War of Independence and helped found Kibbutz Megiddo.

"Israel was always in the back of our minds... It was kind of mysterious."

George's first trip to Israel came at age 18 through Bnei Akiva, a Zionist youth movement. "We would go Friday night after dinner, get together and hang out. Saturday afternoons, it was a big social scene."

He also attended Camp Moshava in Wisconsin. "Which was God awful... it had an olympic sized

swimming pool which was nowhere near an actual olympic sized pool... but as kids, we loved it. It was just incredible fun."

Half of his high school friends spent their first year of college in Israel, in yeshiva or the army. "I wasn't as motivated to do it... and to this day I regret not going to Israel for my first year [of college]."

Still, the trip left a deep impression. "Israel has always been this presence in our hearts... Every time we go, Teresa and I just go 'let's stay.'"

George and Teresa married in 1985 and raised two sons, Michael and Daniel. Daniel recently married, and George looks forward to the next generation.

"I did 23andMe. It was 98.6% Ashkenazi Jew... It just gives me some comfort that it will persist for the next generation at least."

When I asked him what legacy he hopes to leave behind, he paused.

"I do feel some kind of obligation to keep things going. You don't want all that sacrifice and lives lost for nothing, you don't want it to end here."

His father once changed the family name from



George's mother is pictured in the front right, standing with her only surviving sister

Rosenblut to Robot to sound less Jewish, but some relatives who escaped to Chile still carry the original name.

And though names and borders have shifted, what remains constant is the thread, just like that old needlepoint of the family home, connecting past and present.

The Karaite I Might Have Been

By: Leora Rothschild

Deep down, I think I would make a devout Karaite Jew. Give me the Torah text, a quiet room, a pen and paper, and part of me thinks I could interpret a fairer, more equitable Judaism than the one I religiously live.

Today, there are roughly seven thousand Karaites living in Israel whose practical Jewish traditions look vastly different from those of other Jewish sects. For example, Karaites do not celebrate Chanukkah or Purim, as those holidays were instituted by the Rabbis. Karaite Jews have been historically separated from the greater Jewish Nation by their denial of the Torah She'bichtav, The Spoken Bible, which refers to the oral interpretations and transmission of the Bible.

As I became increasingly exposed to a world of differing theological opinions, I found myself unable to understand the reason for Rabbinic Judaism as an interpretation of the Torah. And, on a deeper level, I slowly became unable to defend the morals behind every decision of my daily life: the food I ate, the clothes I wore, and the way I spent my time.

I realized that in becoming an adult, my parents' vision for the 'right way to live' was ingrained in my bones, but it wasn't a way of life I could justify or properly explain. I would have to decide for myself what I believed and how I'd let my beliefs shape my choices. I'd have to think of how I want to raise my children, and what explanation I'd offer them once they start to have questions of their own.

The theology and philosophy I was raised with, namely Modern Orthodoxy, seemed to be an oxymoron. Modern Orthodoxy, shaped by its value of engaging in the secular world of science, history, and philosophy, seemed mutually exclusive from the religious world I was trying to engage in.

Ultimately, committing to daily Talmud study became my way of understanding the essence and legacy of historical debates and the intricate evolution of Jewish law. I would engage in heated debates on Jewish law, mirroring that of the Rabbis in the Talmud: feeling myself formulating opinions on the ideas I mulled over daily.

In my learning, I was faced with the Rabbis' many perspectives on students, like myself, engaging in rigorous Torah study to find answers for their philosophical and seemingly unexplainable questions. For example, in the fifth Mishna of Pirkei Avot, the Rabbis described four types of students: each one with their own abilities and questions.

The diversity amongst Torah-learning-students motivated me to create an experience of Torah-learning that was personal to me. My books of Talmud and Tanakh have always been a clear depiction of this personal experience: I became accustomed to filling the empty margins with my thoughts and questions.

Oftentimes, I would write a question regarding the Mishna in the margin, only to find the same question asked by the Rabbis of the Talmud a couple of lines down the page. Over time, I came to understand that there was no better feeling than asking the same question as the Rabbis who came before me.

I began to see myself as a part of the larger story.

But there was one student the Gemara discussed that I feared I was starting to become: the "all-too-inquisitive student." The Mishna in Chagiga explained,

Whoever looks at four matters, it would have been better for him had he never entered the world: Anyone who stares upon what is above...[and] below the earth, what was before Creation, and what will be after the end of the world. And anyone who has no concern for the honor of his Maker, who inquires into and deals with matters not permitted to him, deserves to have never come to the world (Chagiga 11b).

This Mishna addressed the student who looked beyond his simple and limited human understanding of the world and desperately wanted to understand ideas such as what existed beyond God, the creation of the world, and what life looked like after death.

In the Talmudic explanation of this Mishna in Chagiga, Rabbi Abba explained this student as "one who look[ed] at the rainbow."

The Meiri, a later commentary, synthesized the Mishnaic individual with Rabbi Abba's explanation. The Mishna's use of the word "staring" painted the individual as not merely appreciating aspects of the world, but instead, as a student who overanalyzes and asks too many questions. The rainbow was an example of something God created, a representation of God's abilities that surpass the human mind.

The Meiri's understanding of the Mishnaic individual displayed "questioning" as a delicate endeavor. Despite my efforts to interpret existential concepts, I must glance, but not stare, at God's wonders.

I have to approach ideas with the understanding that I will never be omniscient, or truly find the answers I seek, because even those who devote their lives to exploring the ideas I briefly engage with have yet to discover a universal, definitive answer.

Judaism's origin story is not rooted in a private vision or the teachings of a single figure, but in a historic, mass revelation witnessed by an entire people. Because the Torah is presented as something experienced publicly and then transmitted collectively – including its laws, customs, and interpretations—belief in its divine origin has been framed as historical continuity rather than persuasion.

Thus, if the founding moment was known and carried by a whole community, and that community preserved this memory and passed it down through generations, then the Torah's authority rests on a shared public memory that could not easily be invented after the fact. This inherited memory was what led the Jews to, for generations, believe in the Torah as the word of God.

Ultimately, the preservation of the public memory of Sinai fuels Jewish belief in God.

According to Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb's analytic understanding of the Kuzari, there can be two possible understandings of this "mass revelation."

The first option could be divided into two ideas. First, someone, or a group, could tell the story of a mass revelation at Mount Sinai and pass it on to people for generations, ultimately creating a nation of people who believed in a story one person or one small group fabricated. Alternatively, something natural or similar to the mass revelation happened, but over generations, the story was exaggerated and mythologized into the supernatural story heard today.

As opposed to myth-fabrication and exaggeration, Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb offered another explanation: a large group of people, roughly 600,000, experienced some form of direct divine revelation and were commanded to pass down their experience and newly learned Written and Oral Torah to future generations.

The Kuzari, as per Gottlieb, believed the second option was more logical and likely. According to Gottlieb, there are some types of stories one can convince an entire population to accept, but there are some that cannot be fabricated as per human understanding. One cannot plausibly convince a whole nation that all of its ancestors once participated in a public revelation if nothing of this sort had ever occurred. A claim of that magnitude, if entirely fabricated, would never gain broad acceptance, because the very absence of any inherited memory, practice, or evidence would block it from taking root. Thus, legitimizing Kuzari's second argument over his first.

However, even if God delivered the Torah through mass revelation, the books of codified law were still a human invention. Thus, how could I adhere to an interpretation of God's word as opposed to the way of the Karaites, which consisted of following the written word believed to have been given to the people by God Himself?

I, once again, found myself looking to the Torah for guidance. What was the nation that heard the revelation at Sinai supposed to do with it?

I soon found that the Torah itself created the concept of institutional authority. In Deuteronomy, when a legal or moral case was considered "too baffling" to decide, the people were

commanded to go "to the Levitical priests and to the judge who will be in those days" and to obey the ruling issued "from that place that Hashem will choose" without deviating "to the right or to the left (Deut. 17:8 – 11)."

The Sifrei explained that the mention of "either to the right or the left" was to clearly express that even if it seemed to a person that left is left, if the Torah authority deemed left as right, then that was the law. Here, the Torah acknowledged that individuals have their own moral intuitions, but the Torah authority has been deemed by God to be superior to those who are not as equipped to understand the Torah.

The "Levitical priests" mentioned in the verse were those who could properly interpret the will of the Written Torah based on the interpretations given by God at Mount Sinai. This divine interpretation is known as the "Oral Law."

Ultimately, the authoritative body of Levitical priests became the Beit Din HaGadol, which was the Great Court in Israel, as referred to in Deuteronomy. And, while, Maimonides explained that it was ideal for the Great Sanhedrin to include priests and Levites, if "suitable ones are not found, it is permissible for all the judges to be Israelites." Thus, setting the groundwork for the Oral Law passed down for generations through all types of Jews, not only Levites.

And, the Mishna, which was the Oral Law given on Mount Sinai, expressed, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly..." While the Mishnah was ultimately written down by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi in a feverish and drastic decision to prevent the loss of the Oral tradition, as the Romans exiled the Jews from Israel. The Jews were losing their institutional community structure, and thus their ability to convey the tradition and laws of God through teaching alone. This ultimately led to the need to reconcile seeming contradictions between multiple interpretations of the Torah written in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Sifrei, which were similar compilations of sources written down during Roman Exile for the same reason. These various explanations and interpretations of the written Oral tradition of the Rabbis became the debates recorded in the Talmud.

As I traced the history of my daily choices, suddenly, the classification of myself as a "soon-to-be-Karaite" became a refusal to trust the testimony of my own ancestors. A part of me will always crave a "black and white" world: one where I do not need to believe in anything that lacks definitive proof. But, if I choose to believe that the word of my ancestors remains true – that the Jewish Nation once stood together at Sinai, received both a Written and Oral Torah from God, and spent centuries living and dying by that claim, then I inherit more than a story. I inherit a responsibility.

I am a link in the chain of Jewish continuity. I will give my Talmud books filled with notes and questions in the margins to my children, and maybe they will one day write a question in the margin of their Talmud and have a wonderful moment of realization that they had written the same question I had written so many years ago.

A TIMELINE OF JEWISH CONTINUITY



The covenant with Avraham establishes the Jewish people; Sarah, the first matriarch, begins the lineage that will shape the nation's future.



From Yosef's enslavement in Egypt to Yetziat Mitzrayim and the giving of the Ten Commandments; the Jewish people receive their law, identity, and collective destiny.



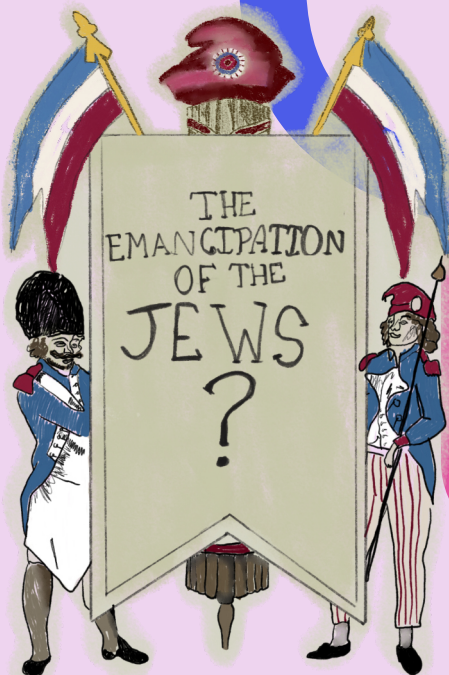
Israel settles the land, David is crowned king in Jerusalem, and the First Temple is built, becoming the spiritual and national center of the Jewish people until its destruction centuries later.



Haskalah, or the Age of Jewish Enlightenment encouraged the addition of secular education, challenged traditional Rabbinic authority, and planted the seeds of many future Jewish movements such as the Reform Movement, etc. etc.



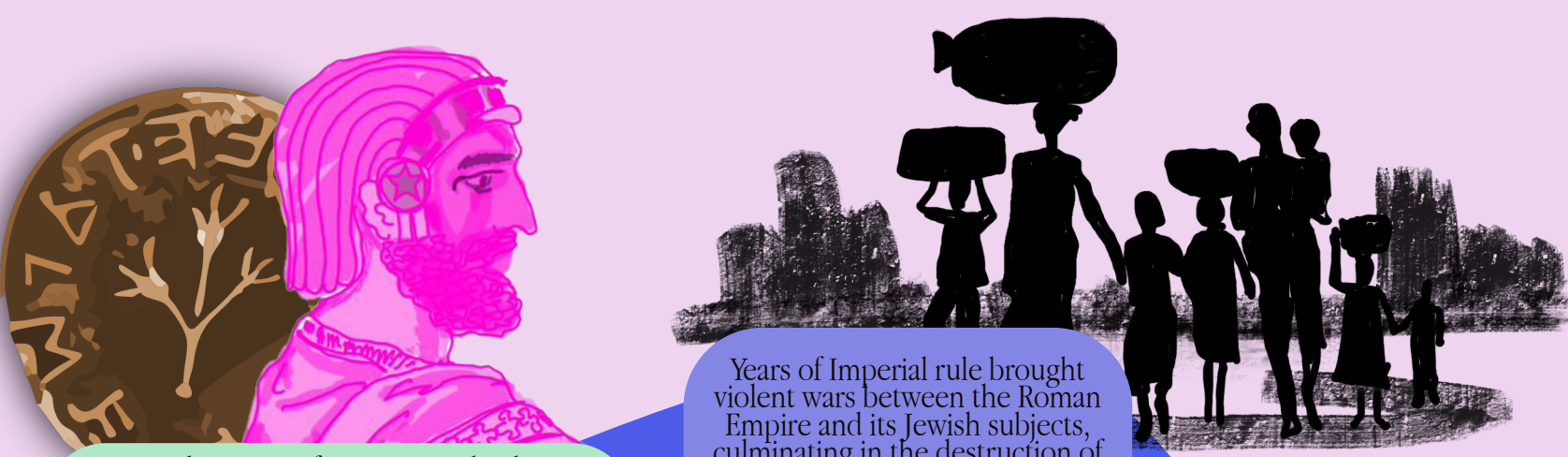
The Ba'al Shem Tov popularized Hasidism, a new conception of Judaism that was more accessible to the masses, and emphasized joy and personal prayer.



The struggle for Emancipation of the Jews in Europe began with the French Revolution in 1791 and ended, with full emancipation, during the revolutions of 1848. Until Emancipation, European Jewish life was marked by crippling economic, social, and political restrictions, though Jewish life remained vibrant, dynamic, and creative despite it all.

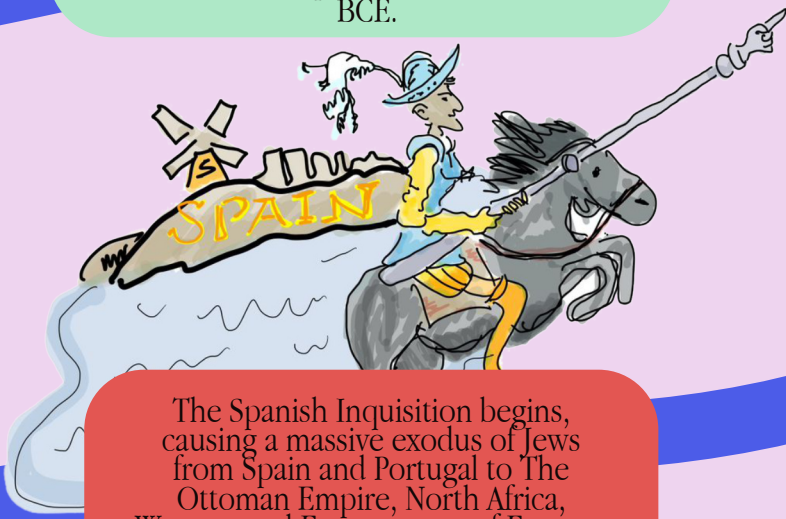


Eliezer Ben-Yehuda moves to Palestine and revives the Hebrew Language, which hadn't been spoken for over 2,000 years



Cyrus the Great of Persia issued a decree permitting Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple, ending the 70-year exile of the Jews. Although a significant portion chose to remain in exile, the spiritual and political life of the Jews was renewed when the Second Temple was dedicated in 516 BCE.

Years of Imperial rule brought violent wars between the Roman Empire and its Jewish subjects, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple and the death of roughly 70% of the Jewish population. Forced to flee their homeland, the dispersion of the Jewish people began with this devastation.



The Spanish Inquisition begins, causing a massive exodus of Jews from Spain and Portugal to The Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Western and Eastern parts of Europe, Italy, and even Colonial America.



The Talmud is completed, a culmination of hundreds of years of Rabbinic scholarship, aimed at preserving Jewish life without the Temple or the Land of Israel.



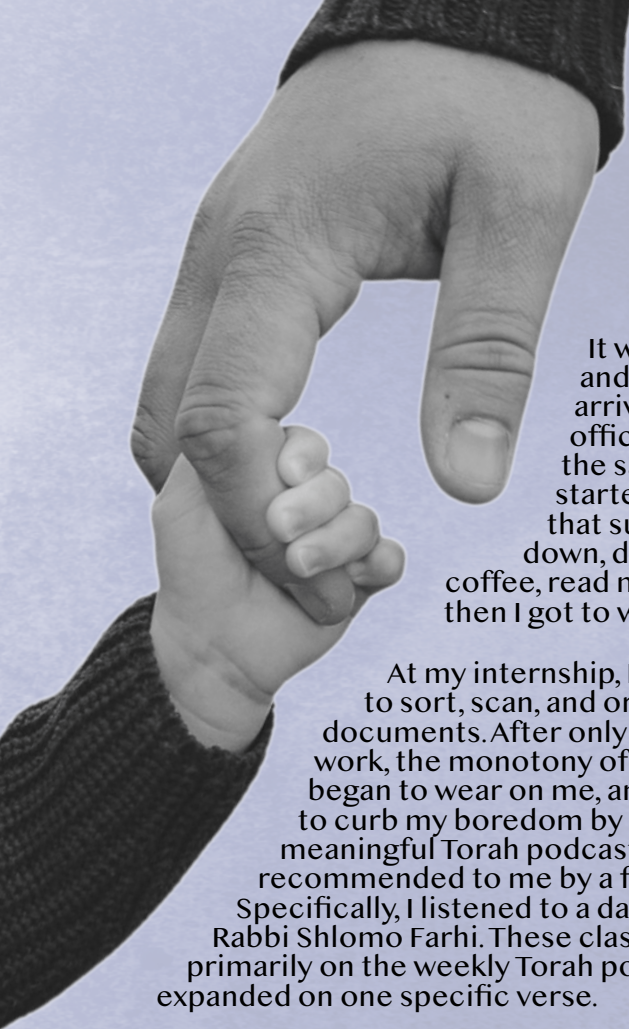
Theodore Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress to advance the founding of a Jewish state in British Mandate Palestine, working to facilitate Jewish immigration and international sponsorship.



Hitler's Germany executed the systematic murder of over 6 million Jews across Europe, causing mass immigration to Palestine and the United States.

The State of Israel is established, ending the War of Independence, a long-fought battle to regain self-determination and create a safe haven for the Jewish people.





Who will be

It was July 17th, and I promptly arrived at the office at 8:55 a.m. In the same way I started every day that summer, I sat down, drank my coffee, read my book, and then I got to work.

At my internship, I was assigned to sort, scan, and organize legal documents. After only a few days of work, the monotony of these tasks began to wear on me, and I attempted to curb my boredom by listening to meaningful Torah podcasts recommended to me by a friend.

Specifically, I listened to a daily class by Rabbi Shlomo Farhi. These classes focused primarily on the weekly Torah portion and expanded on one specific verse.

As I arose from my desk chair, in an attempt to break up the tedium of another day at work, I reached for my AirPods and pressed play on Rabbi Farhi's class recording for the day titled "Grandpa Who?"

The familiar opening of "Good morning, good morning, Rabotai" rang in my ears as I picked up the mounds of legal documents I was intended to file away. As I eagerly listened, Rabbi Farhi began with the first line of the parsha.

The verse stated that God spoke to Moses, saying:

"Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, diverted My anger from the Israelites by zealously avenging Me among them..." (Bamidbar 25:11).

Initially, I did not notice anything out of the ordinary in this verse until Farhi presented Rashi's Biblical commentary, noting how mentioning Aaron as Pinchas' grandfather was repetitive, because the Torah had already relayed in past verses that Elazar was Aaron's son.

Rashi explained that the people of Israel would "disparage" Pinchas, the son of Elazar, for having Yitro, an idol worshiper, as a grandfather. Pinchas publicly displayed his faith through the slaying of Zimri and Cosbi, and proved his devotion to God and the Jewish people. Thus, according to Rashi, the verse explicitly traced Pinchas's lineage back to Aaron the High Priest to debunk the nation's

unrighteous spoken claims about his lineage.

From this point, Farhi established the principle on which the remainder of his talk was predicated. The Torah wishes to bring our attention to the choice within Pinchas, whether he would follow in Yitro's or Aaron's ways. I found that to be an extremely pressing lesson for our day and age.

We as Jews have a choice of what type of person and what type of Jew we want to be. The choice stems from the two versions of ourselves that exist within our souls: the grandson of Yitro and the grandson of Aaron. It is our decision which path we wish to venture on. The grandson of Aaron is the one who, like Pinchas, went the extra mile to make the right decisions, no matter how difficult the choice. This was explicitly shown when he took the initiative to strike down the adulterers and reestablish God's glory within the nation. On the other hand, Yitro went above and beyond in his idol worship and allowed the Jewish values he closely witnessed slip by the wayside and remain in temporal apathy. Although Yitro later decided to convert to Judaism, the vast majority of his life was spent in the opposite corner of Aaron, as the High Priest of the idol-worshipping Midianite people.

I was touched by this point from Farhi, as he expressed with fervor how essential it was for people to be the grandsons of Aaron in a time when fewer and fewer Jews practice Halachic observance. And, what truly resonated with me deepest was his mention of a song by Moshe Yess, written in the 1980s, titled "My Zaidy," which is Yiddish for "my grandfather." As Rabbi Farhi recited the opening lines of the song, I recalled my Zaidy, who passed away in middle school and from whom I derived my connection to Judaism. I quickly paused the D'var Torah to look up the song on Spotify. As I pressed play and heard the first lines of the song, accompanied by the slow strum of the guitar, I was entranced by its profound message.

Yess sang about the way his Zaidy would teach him Torah with glee, and spoke about the story of Egypt with such affinity you would think he had been there himself. But, one day, upon returning from camp, Yess' Zaidy passed away, and slowly but surely, so did his family's observance of Judaism: a story all too similar to my own.

At this point in the song, I realized I had ceased working entirely and was crying profusely in the center of the office. Quickly, I paused the music and ran to the bathroom, where I washed my face and recomposed myself.

the Zaidys?

By: Aden Lerner

But I could not help myself; I pressed play again, and the lyrics touched me even more. Moshe Yess continued to sing the thoughts I had held onto long before this moment. "I don't know how or why it came to be / It happened slowly over many years / We just stopped being Jewish like my Zaidy was / And no one cared enough to shed a tear." After hearing this line, I could not help but think that Yess was speaking directly to me, standing next to me with his arm on my shoulder, consoling me, letting me know he understood.

The phenomenon Yess described in his song was precisely the process that occurred after my Zaidy's death. At first, it was weekly Shabbat dinners that slowly ceased. Later, my family exerted little effort to refrain from eating bread on Passover, and ultimately, I realized that we no longer cared to go to synagogue or even fast on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. With the loss of my Zaidy came the loss of my family's observance of Jewish faith, tradition, and practice.

It was only when I came to the University of Maryland that I reconnected to the path of Judaism that my Zaidy set out for me when I was a boy. The community that I found here epitomized what it meant to find appreciation for strong Jewish observance amidst a secular educational foundation. It was in the balance of these extremes that I found the one that worked for me.

In the penultimate stanza of the song, Yess prompted the question that was directly tied to Rabbi Farhi's discussion; he begs his listeners to ponder, "Who will be the Zaidys of our children? / Who will be their Zaidys, if not we?" As the previous generations of Zaidys continue to grow old and pass away, the newest generation of Jews is left with a gaping hole in their identity. Farhi made this exact point, expanding on how the ways of the old Jewish world are leaving us, and Jewish ritual tradition is becoming few and far between.

Connecting the song's words back to the Rashi, Farhi explained that both of Pinchas' grandfathers were considered extremists by their community standards. On one hand, Yitro was an idol worshipper who went out of his way to fatten the cows so that

they would not only be sufficient, but in a gluttonous state for his idol worship. On the other hand, Aaron was an extremist in his pursuit of peace and Jewish observance. Certainly, both of these grandfathers were extremists; however, Farhi points out that Aaron's is far superior to Yitro's. All three of Yitro, Aaron, and Pinchas were emblematic of extreme lives, yet it was within their extremes that drove them towards purpose.

Today, the daily practices that would have been considered extreme decades ago are simple aspects of life. To spend hours upon hours a day on electronic devices, so much so that to give them up for a day would be an insurmountable burden, is considered to be a typical part of secular life. Nonetheless, if one were to decide to give up eating certain foods, listening to certain music, or engaging with certain media, many would call them insane and out of touch with reality. Therefore, Farhi explains, today, as Pinchas knew, sometimes it is necessary to take 'extreme' measures to lead a meaningful life. This is the answer to Yess' plea of not only who will be the Zaidys of the future, but how it will, and must be us.

In that small office, surrounded by case files, I discovered that holiness is not limited to the synagogue or the seder table. It can happen anywhere, even at a desk in a law office, when you awaken to the legacy within you. When my co-workers at the office asked me if I would care to eat at a non-kosher restaurant, I politely declined, and when they asked if I had any interest in going to a baseball game on Saturday, I responded that I was busy that day.

The legacy of the Jewish people depends on each individual to make the difficult choice and decide which path they wish to pursue. This is not to say that there is no place for embracing the world around us, but that this embrace cannot come at the expense of Jewish practice and continuity. When our priorities shift too far from Jewish tradition, they eventually lead to its demise. Now, just like our Zaidys of old, we have the responsibility of continuing the tradition that was promised to us; the only question is, which course we choose: Who will be the Zaidys of our children? / Who will be their Zaidys, if not we?



WHEN CAIN KILLED CAIN

By: Liad Mussaffi

The first story in the Torah involving human beings that were born, not created, is about Cain and Abel. It should be a story of brotherhood. Instead, it turns into the first homicide. God created the universe and then showed how grotesque human nature can be.

It is a cruel beginning.

"Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!"

Unsettling.

"I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Chilling.

"I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be exacted."

Genesis:4 details the consequence of the ugliest emotion – jealousy – and how far humans can go when powered by a wounded ego. This mere 16-line story is the blueprint for how humanity deals with jealousy, conflict, and struggle.

What's offered in this story is darker than just a tale of murder. It is not about the actual butchery, but the motivations that will turn brothers against each other, and ultimately themselves.

The story is nothing short of bizarre, at the very least. Cain was a tiller of soil, and Abel was a sheepkeeper. Historically, sheepkeepers emblemize traits of leadership, care and guidance, as seen by our patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Moses. Tilling soil, though, is linked spiritually to being bound to something-- in this case, the ground. Cain's character represents the toil and struggle that comes with reliance on working the land. Abel represented the ideal, and Cain was the struggle to reach it. The ideal is the self we ache to become—deserving of divine approval— and Abel stood as that unbearable contrast for Cain.

When Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden and became aware—almost self-conscious—of themselves and the concept of death, they discerned that sacrifice was a method of fate bargaining. Cain and Abel also realized that if they made sacrifices in the present, they could ensure a better future for themselves.

It became a kind of game between humans and God: what will be enough for the Almighty?

It was this question that ultimately brought the first brother to commit the first murder. Cain brought a fruit

offering to God, and Abel brought the first and fattest sheep of his flock; both gifts were related to their jobs of agriculture and shepherding. God rejects Cain's humble offering and praises Abel's.

The provocation by God was deliberately designed to expose early dynamics of envy, the first time this remarkably human emotion is displayed. By accepting Abel's offering and not Cain's, with no clear rationale, God fostered an environment of social comparison where resentment festers.

Sensing frustration brewing within the rejected Cain, God offers him a chance to reflect: "Why are you distressed, and why has your face fallen?" is God attempting to navigate Cain's inner disposition and translate it into words. He gives Cain an opportunity to think before he acts, and continued with a poetic warning:

"Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master."

Cain, however, does not take God's pedagogical invitation to reflect and "master" his urge.

Succumbing to his jealousy, Cain commits fratricide. Lo and behold, the first murder. Ambiguous. Cold. Merciless.

Life presents inevitable suffering. Everyone will encounter situations where their value goes unrecognized, whilst others' is praised. By combining the story of the first brother and the first murder, we come to understand the darkness that comes from underanalyzed, unmastered envy, and how quickly a wounded ego can turn into something worse.

God then cursed Cain, declaring him a ceaseless wanderer of the earth. Cain was worried that if he was banished, people would kill him. "I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me," he said.

Even though Cain was the first documented murderer, he is keenly aware of how people might treat him knowing what he's done.

"am i my brother's keeper?"

It was a new form of self-consciousness; no longer a feeling placed on him by God's rejection, but because of his own actions. He was scared of being the first person to have a reputation tainted by murder.

God promised that if anyone killed him, "sevenfold vengeance" would happen to them, meaning Cain would not die from murder. This reflects similarities in today's prison system. Receiving a life sentence in cruel conditions is often seen as a fate worse than death. God did not want Cain to be murdered, almost as if that's the easy way out of escaping his mistakes. He wanted him to be banished to a life of self-reflection, which was "too great to bear" for Cain.

Because Cain couldn't satisfy God with his sacrifice, he killed who did, and with that, his potential. As psychologist Jordan Peterson profoundly put it, "you need an ideal to live for...when you destroy your ideal, then you've got nothing."

Cain would tear God
he could, but he spills
because he can.

He couldn't reach

from the heavens if
Abel's blood

God, so he struck
the nearest
reflection of
divine. It was, as
Peterson said,
"murder done
consciously to spite
the creator of the
universe."

Centuries later,
murder is still a
product of
unmastered jealousy
and a wounded ego.
The school shooter

revenge
Not only
lives, they ruin any chance they had at
their bitterness, at overcoming.

The emotions present within Cain throughout this story ring true for many readers, but most people would never even consider murder as an outlet. There are still ways we sabotage the higher versions of ourselves when we feel discouraged. It's more subtle. Less calculated.

You miss your alarm, so you don't go to class at all. Had you gone late, you might've just learned something. You are diagnosed with a sickness, so you abandon the habits that can help you heal, decreasing your chances of remission. You don't get the job you want, so you stop applying to others, ensuring you'll never work again.

When you get rid of the goal—the paragon—there is nothing more to strive towards. Without that North Star, you default to fixing the immediate problem, instead of what's really collapsing inside you. Therefore, you solve the problem on a technical level, but you introduce a new one within yourself. How can you be good or better when you remove the paradigm of what that looks like? Cain had no model of good when he removed Abel.

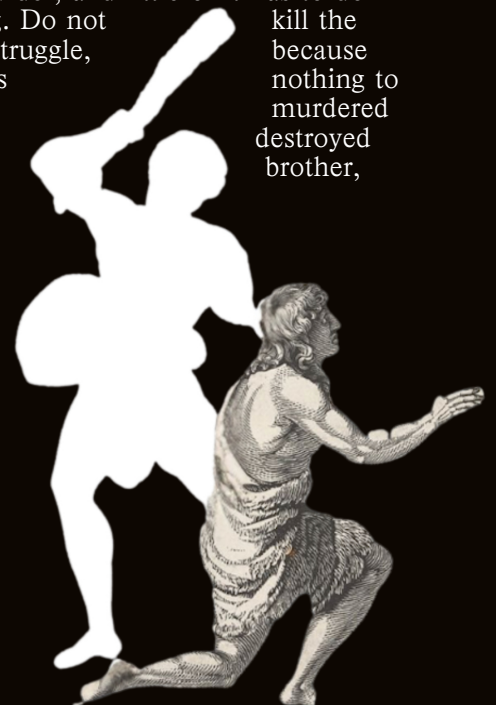
It is worth noting how the temptation towards a malevolent force of sin carries through Cain's legacy. His father, Adam, disobeyed God's commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit. Cain's great-grandson, Lamech, went on to be the second murderer in recorded history, according to the Torah. "I have slain a person for wounding me, and a lad for bruising me," Lamech said. Adam introduced disobeying God. Cain introduced the method for revenge. His great-grandson followed in their ways. Lemach bore Noah, who he said would "provide [him] relief...out of the very soil which [God] placed under a curse." Noah's generation, though, was "nothing but evil all the time," according to God. Cain's lineage was marked by sin and a pattern of disobeying God, engraved in their family's legacy.

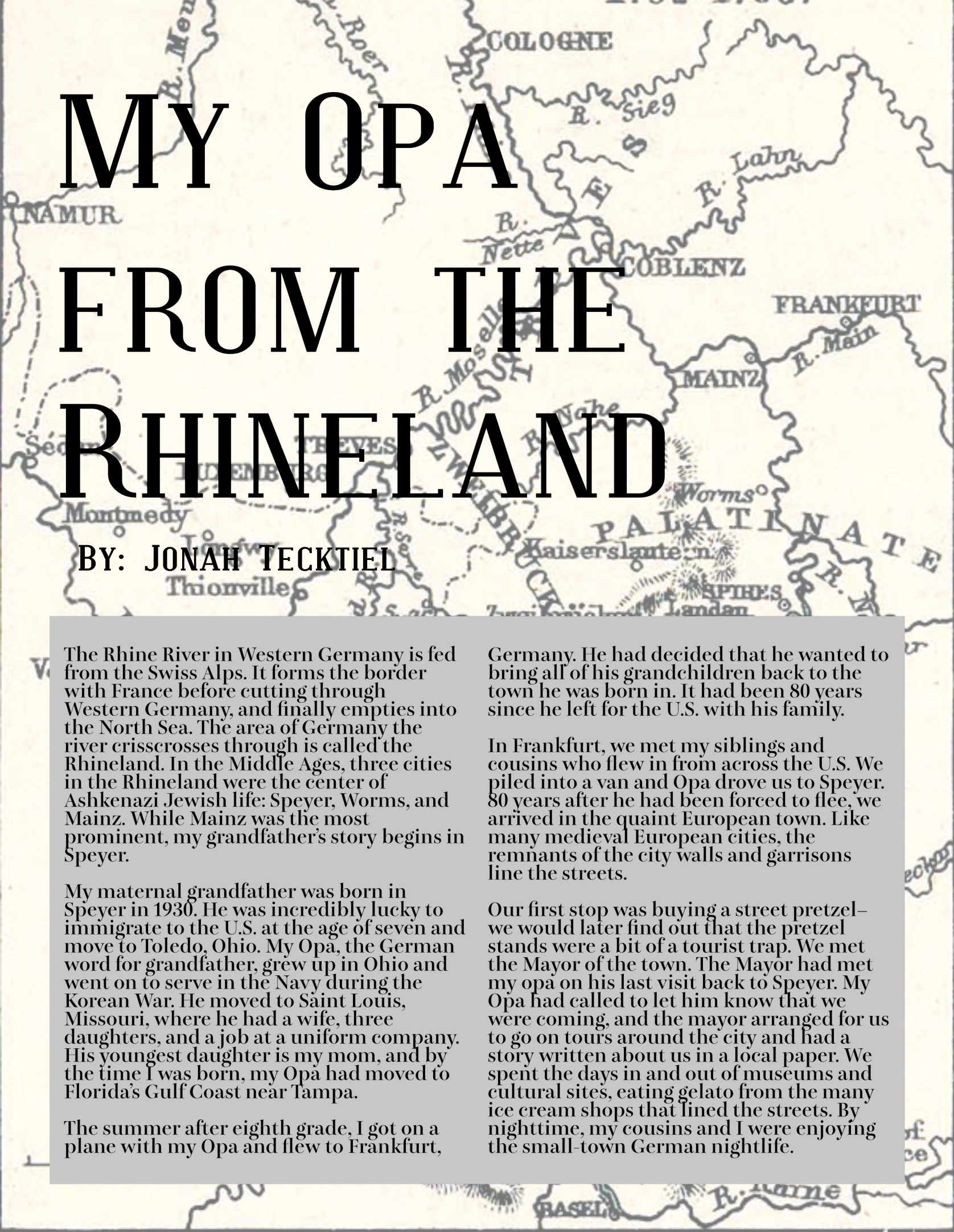
Cain's inability to rise above a wounded ego, setting a precedent for shrugging responsibility and rebelling against God, shows in his family history, but this story is more than that. It represents the two archetypal human beings.

As Peterson puts it, "Abel provides an early model for the redemptive savior...the other, Cain, refuses his responsibility, justifies that refusal with his existential pain and fear, and turns savage, destructive, corrupt and murderous." They are the two pathways of choice in the face of perennial struggle.

It is easy to assume we are more like Abel, striving toward good. But it would be fallacious to assume we do not have Cain in us as well. There is much to take from the story of the first murder, and little of it has to do with actual slaughtering. Do not ideal when faced with struggle, without an ideal, there's strive towards. Cain Abel, but the crime him too; in killing his Cain killed Cain.

kill the
because
nothing to
murdered
destroyed
brother,





MY OPA FROM THE RHINELAND

BY: JONAH TECKTIEL

The Rhine River in Western Germany is fed from the Swiss Alps. It forms the border with France before cutting through Western Germany, and finally empties into the North Sea. The area of Germany the river crisscrosses through is called the Rhineland. In the Middle Ages, three cities in the Rhineland were the center of Ashkenazi Jewish life: Speyer, Worms, and Mainz. While Mainz was the most prominent, my grandfather's story begins in Speyer.

My maternal grandfather was born in Speyer in 1930. He was incredibly lucky to immigrate to the U.S. at the age of seven and move to Toledo, Ohio. My Opa, the German word for grandfather, grew up in Ohio and went on to serve in the Navy during the Korean War. He moved to Saint Louis, Missouri, where he had a wife, three daughters, and a job at a uniform company. His youngest daughter is my mom, and by the time I was born, my Opa had moved to Florida's Gulf Coast near Tampa.

The summer after eighth grade, I got on a plane with my Opa and flew to Frankfurt,

Germany. He had decided that he wanted to bring all of his grandchildren back to the town he was born in. It had been 80 years since he left for the U.S. with his family.

In Frankfurt, we met my siblings and cousins who flew in from across the U.S. We piled into a van and Opa drove us to Speyer. 80 years after he had been forced to flee, we arrived in the quaint European town. Like many medieval European cities, the remnants of the city walls and garrisons line the streets.

Our first stop was buying a street pretzel—we would later find out that the pretzel stands were a bit of a tourist trap. We met the Mayor of the town. The Mayor had met my opa on his last visit back to Speyer. My Opa had called to let him know that we were coming, and the mayor arranged for us to go on tours around the city and had a story written about us in a local paper. We spent the days in and out of museums and cultural sites, eating gelato from the many ice cream shops that lined the streets. By nighttime, my cousins and I were enjoying the small-town German nightlife.

As the youngest member of the group I couldn't drink, even with Germany's lower drinking age.



ME AND MY OPA IN
GERMANY

One of the many landmarks we saw during our trip was the oldest-preserved mikvah in Europe. Dating back to around 1120, the mikvah in Speyer had provided ritual cleansing to medieval Jews. A mikvah needs to be connected to a natural water source and they are often dug in similar processes to wells. The mikvah itself is deep underground to reach the ground water they need.

Stones carved almost a century before I was born encase a still pool of natural water. Drops ripple across the water as rain pitters through the sky opening. The mikvah had at one time been connected to a larger complex that included a shul, a woman's shul, and a yeshiva. All that's left of the other buildings are broken brick walls, and yet the mikvah is incredibly preserved. The main reason medieval Jewish structures are still standing is that the walls had been built into the buildings around them and were out of use.

The new-ish Jewish community in Speyer is primarily Russian Jews. We went to shul

on Shabbat morning for services and got to meet the Jews living in Speyer today. The community had migrated from Russia in the mid-90s. My Opa had been to the shul's inauguration.

The construction of the synagogue started 70 years after the one my Opa went to was destroyed on Kristallnacht. We visited the memorial that now stands where the shul had been. It was just around the corner from the building that my Opa spent his childhood in.

The bottom floor was a shoeshop that my great-grandfather owned and operated. The next floor up was where my grandfather lived, and above them were apartments that his family rented out. Today, the first two floors are a bank, but the upper floors remain apartments. Walking through the remnants of Opa's childhood, we saw the life that he left when he came to the U.S.



MY OPA IN FRONT OF HIS
CHILDHOOD HOME

The Collector

Ava Rowse



**A Peninsula man, nestled between deep woods and reservation cliffs,
makes a home from millions of things.**

His walls hold what others leave behind

doorknobs, bottles, books, buttons, keys, clocks, pins.

Each item weighs in the collector's quiet hand,

its story recorded in a journal the size of my palm,

so that the abandoned may live again.



Palace of Versailles

The Palace of Versailles—long a symbol of absolute monarchy and exclusion of French Jews—became, in 1789, the unlikely home of modern French citizenship. It was there that the old social order began to fracture and new ideas of national belonging, equality, and civic identity took shape. For Jews, who had lived for generations as perpetual outsiders with many restrictions, the political revolution born at Versailles marked a turning point in our history. The movement that began in these walls culminated in the 1791 decree granting Jews full citizenship—the first such emancipation in Europe—transforming them from subjects without a voice into equal members of the French nation. Yet in the turbulent years that followed, as France cycled through various political visions, the promise of emancipation remained fragile, its realization dependent on the ability of the Frenchmen to see Jews as one of their own.

Eli Turansky

An Ode to Jewish Fashion





The Tichel is a traditional headscarf worn by married Jewish women as a form of tzniut rooted in ancient halachic texts. Many women wear their tichels with intentionality and creativity, using it as a form of self expression

Tichel

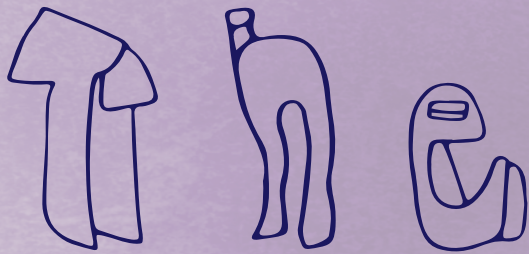


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Shtreimel



The Shtreimel is a round fur hat traditionally worn by married Hasi on special occasions, like holidays and weddings. It is a visible marker of family responsibility and considered a garment of honor. It dates back several centuries in eastern Europe



My name is Daniella,

but people don't know that. Everyone calls me Daniel. I don't blame them because I look and dress like a Daniel. I have only told Becky, my best friend, that my name is now Daniella.

I would never tell my parents. I was born into a prominent Modern Orthodox Jewish family, so telling them or anyone aside from Becky is out of the question. My dad is a rabbi at the school and my siblings are in their prime dating years. If I came out, I don't know who would be more upset – my dad for tarnishing the family legacy, or my siblings for destroying the family reputation and removing any chance for them to find their perfect spouse.

This story started on Purim in my freshman year of high school. It was supposed to be the happiest day of my year, as it was, and still is, the only day I can dress like a Daniella without anyone caring. I went to morning services in a baggy dress, a party wig, and some very short heels. People thought it was hilarious. I didn't care that the notion of me dressed as a woman was a punchline. I was fully captured by how my dress swayed in the air, and this fleeting moment of freedom.

Ezekiel, or Zeke as I called him, just wore a basketball jersey. Most of the guys lacked imagination with their costumes. But Zeke was my crush. Sure, he was shorter than me, even though he was a year ahead, and he had such an ugly name, but ever since I saw him swimming last summer at the beach, I could not stop thinking about him.

Becky and I were walking out of the synagogue when Zeke came up to us. Becky dressed up as a dreidel. She thought it would be hilarious to go as something from a different holiday. Ha ha, I guess.

Becky and I were together so often that the school principal had to talk to us about modesty, just in case we got any ideas. People thought we were going to be the first couple to get married from our grade. The two of us tried so hard not to laugh when people brought that up. Becky was pretty, sure, but it wasn't because I wanted to sleep with her. I wanted to be her. Zeke, however, wanted to sleep with her.

"Hey, Daniel, CRAZY costume! Hilarious man!"

"Thanks Zeke. I-"

"So, Becky, whatcha doing this afternoon?"

Fitting. He's wearing a basketball jersey and has such a great pivot. In hindsight, Zeke was always an asshole to



me. I don't know why I had a crush on him. Ok, I do know why: I was desperate and had seen him shirtless. But I like to pretend that I don't know why.

He continued: "The two of you should come to my place. We're having a Purim party."

I had never been invited to a party before. Not a real party. Zeke is here, inviting me to his place. Sure, it was only because I happened to be standing next to Becky, but a win's a win.

Later in the day, Becky and I were leaving my house to head to Zeke's. My dad wished us a happy Purim and said he could pick us up if needed. He was always nicer when people outside the family were around. I was still in my dress and wig, but I replaced the heels with flats at this point. If I ever do transition, I will be a flats girly. I had a newfound respect for the women in my family. As we approached Zeke's house, we heard music and singing.

"Daniella, are you nervous?"

"No, why?"

I had never been more nervous in my life. I knocked, and a boy our age, someone I didn't recognize, opened the door.

"Heyyyyyyy, come on in!"

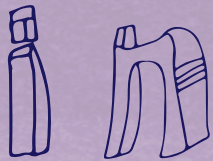
I could smell alcohol on his breath. Becky and I saw a packed house with beer bottles all on the floor. It was something out of a TV show. Not fitting for a Jewish community, as my dad would say.

The rest of the night was a blur. Partly because of the drinks handed to me; partly because I wanted to forget that night after learning what happened to Becky. I remember music, costumes and Becky talking with Zeke. I felt jealous, hated the taste of beer, and loved dancing in a dress for the first time. Becky threw up, and somehow I got home.

The rumors started swirling the next day at school.

"Who was there? Who wasn't? Where were his parents? Did you hear about Zeke and Becky? No, what?"

Becky didn't talk to me about it for months. The rumors came and went.



Rumblings about her making a move on Zeke. I tried not to think about it. She knew I liked Zeke, and I wanted to believe that she wouldn't do anything to hurt me. But I could only restrain myself for so long. Eventually, towards the end of May, we were hiding in some abandoned room in the school after class, sitting across from each other. She was putting makeup on me, trying to determine the right shade of lipstick.

"Hey, Becky...about Purim...I think it's time we talk about it."

She took a deep breath and looked down, like someone who knows there is nowhere else to run. "What's there to talk about...He did what he did...He got away with it...That's that." "What do you mean 'got away with it'? With what? Are the rumors true?" She started to look back up at me.

"He took me outside into the backyard. Farther and farther away from people. I tripped on a stick and fell on the ground. My leg was hurt, so I couldn't kick him away. The rest is, well, the rest."

Shock is a wave. It starts at your feet, then rushes atop you, and before you know it, you're submerged. You can't see, you're gasping for air. Then, once you think it's over, another wave comes. From the soles of your feet, up through your legs and chest until it hits your head and you start to cry. Wave after wave. Stronger and stronger. Becky saw that I wanted to say something to comfort her, but I physically couldn't. So she gave me a hug. I hugged her back as tight as possible, trying to pour my love and soul into her.

There was no script for this situation. Well, maybe there was, but in a school where sex education is abstinence only, I definitely did not learn it. But my guess at a good response was:

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Yeah, a rabbi. He told me I shouldn't ruin a boy's reputation because of something like this." "Which rabbi said that?!"

I sprinted. It took maybe thirty seconds to get to my dad's classroom. He had always taught me about grace and staying calm. That was all about to fly out the window. I



A Short Story by Yonah Gross

was trying to come up with something to say. So much for an eye for an eye. My mind wasn't clear enough to say anything. All I could do was slam the classroom door behind me.

"Danny, what's wrong?"

I told him. I told him about the party and Zeke and Becky and that I knew what he said. Becky walked into the room, as pale as I had ever seen her.

"Daniel, you must understand. These things, they...they leave marks. On people, on families, on schools. Marks don't easily go away. Imagine if someone said something like this about you. I could see the headlines already. 'Upstanding Jewish Boy Disgraces Community'."

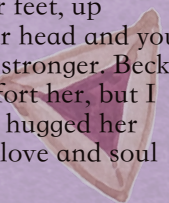
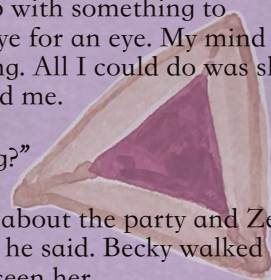
I turned to Becky. She was on the verge of tears. I wanted to yell and shout and tell my dad my real name. But this wasn't about me. It was about Becky. I sat down at a desk. Becky sat down next to me. I heard her say something under her breath. She was repeating a verse from the Purim story; the book of Esther.

"VaCaasher Avaditi, Avaditi."

Translation: If I perish, I perish. She repeated this again and again. I didn't know what to do. Such a debilitating feeling, not knowing what to do. I then started to think about what my dad said. Marks...reputations...legacies. We care so much about how we look and how we come across. I always did. Hiding my truth for the sake of optics. Maybe every day could be Purim. We would all accept that this is all dress-up, all make-believe. Just costumes, just drag. And the truth, everything that really matters, is different from what is visible. If every day were Purim, I might be able to be Daniella every day.

My dad walked over to where I was sitting, put his hand on my chin, and lifted my face. "Son, why are you wearing lipstick?"

"VeNahafoch Hu, dad. We live in a topsy turvy world."





Spot the Differences!



Be the talk of the town... and write for Mitzpeh

Writers, artists, photographers, graphic designers,
podcasters, editors, videographers, website
designers, and thinkers in general



Half a Shekel,

In 66 CE, the Jewish people wanted autonomy from the Roman Empire. After watching the Holy Temple be looted and desecrated, they led a revolt against Roman rule in Judea. Brutal suppression devolved into war and culminated in one of the greatest catastrophes in Jewish life. On the 9th of Av in 70 CE, the temple was destroyed, Jerusalem fell, and the diaspora of the Jewish people began.

Only a few years before, the Jews began minting their own coins, which was a sign of self-government and forbidden under Roman rule. The Half Shekel coin was designated for a mandatory contribution to the Temple offerings brought on behalf of the entire nation.



The Half Shekel has a branch with three pomegranates, with "Holy Jerusalem" engraved around it.

as a portion to God.

Exodus 30:13